

Minutes of the Fifth meeting
held January 13, 1911.

MINUTES OF THE FIFTH MEETING OF THE COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS,

Held January thirteenth, 1911.

The fifth meeting of the Commission of Fine Arts, called by the Vice-Chairman, was held in its Office, Room 7, 4th floor, Lemon Building, 1729 New York Avenue, NW., Washington, D. C., on Friday, January 13, 1911. There were present the following members:

Mr. Burnham, the Chairman;

Mr. Olmsted;

Mr. French;

Mr. Millet;

Mr. Gilbert; also

Colonel Spencer Cosby, the Secretary and Executive Officer.

The meeting was called to order by the Chairman at 11:05 and immediately proceeded to the business before it.

1. The minutes of the last meeting were presented, and were approved after the presentation and adoption of an amendment proposed by Mr. Olmsted, making that part of paragraph 7, formerly reading

"It was suggested that, if possible, the submission of eight blueprints by the District Commissioners be requested in order that each member of the Commission may be able to inspect the plans before the next formal meeting of the Commission"

now read

"It was suggested that the District Commissioners be requested to submit eight sets of blue prints when possible, in order that each member of the Commission may be able to inspect the plans before the next formal meeting of the Commission".

2. The members expressed their unanimous opinion that Friday, in general, is the best day of the week on which to hold Commission meetings.

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3. The question of permanent quarters for the Commission was again discussed but it was decided to defer further action in the matter until after the passage of the Sundry Civil Appropriation Bill. Attention was called to the convenience of having the office of the Commission in the same building as the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, whose records and data have to be frequently consulted, and where the Secretary is permanently located.

4. The Secretary called attention to the fact that the Treasury Department was about to proceed with the erection of the new building for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing without submitting the final plans to the Commission; after discussion, it ^{was} deemed advisable not to take any action in the matter.

5. The Secretary read the letter of the Chairman of the Senate Committee on the Library, transmitting an original painting by George Heriot of the two Capitol Buildings before they were burned by the British during the War of 1812, and requesting a report from the Commission of Fine Arts as to its artistic merit, historical value, money value, and the desirability of its purchase by the Government. Mr. Glenn Brown's informal opinion as to the historical value, money value and desirability of purchase was read, and Mr. Millet's opinion as to its artistic merit was given. After a close inspection of the painting, upon motion duly made and seconded, it was

"RESOLVED, That, in the opinion of the Commission of Fine Arts, the watercolor drawing of the Capitol before 1812 by George Heriot, offered to the Government for purchase, does not possess sufficient artistic merit to warrant its acquisition. Further, it does not add any information to data already recorded in permanent form. In the opinion of the Commission of Fine Arts the value of the drawing does not exceed Two hundred and fifty dollars."

6. The Secretary read the letter from the Joint Committee on the Library, re-

The Committee on Governmental Organization and Administration has been studying the various proposals for the reorganization of the Executive Department of the Government. It has held numerous public hearings and has received many suggestions from the public. It has also conducted extensive research into the various problems connected with the present organization of the Executive Department. The Committee believes that the present organization is not well adapted to the needs of the Government and that a reorganization is necessary. It has proposed a number of different plans for the reorganization of the Executive Department. The Committee believes that the plan which it has proposed is the best one for the Government. It has submitted this plan to the President and the Senate for their consideration.

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requesting that the Commission examine and report as to the artistic merits of the portrait of Gen. George H. Thomas, bequeathed to the Government. As the portrait could not be taken from its position in the Office of the Senate Committee on the Library, on account of its large size, final action was deferred until after an examination of the portrait had been made later in the day. Then the following resolution was adopted:

"RESOLVED, That the Commission of Fine Arts, after a careful examination of the portrait of General George H. Thomas, painted by the late Miss Caroline L. Ransom and offered by the terms of her will as a gift to the nation, cannot recommend the acceptance of the portrait on the ground of its artistic merit."

7. The Secretary read the letter from the Joint Committee on the Library, requesting that the Commission prepare and submit to it alternative plans and estimates of cost for an appropriate standard type of bronze tablets to mark historical places in the District of Columbia. After a full discussion of the matter, it was decided to hold it over until after an interview with Senator Wetmore, when a letter, containing the report of the Commission, was sent to ^{him as} the Chairman of the Joint Committee on the Library. (For letter see Exhibit A.)

8. The general profile study of the Mall was considered by the Commission, and Mr. Burnap, in consultation, was instructed to have further drawings prepared with special reference to determining grade data for the new State Department Building.

9. The Secretary read the letter from the Officer in charge of Public Buildings and Grounds, with accompanying report of the landscape architect, requesting the opinion of the Commission relative to the old Treasury Department columns now reposing in Potomac Park, - whether they can be used to advantage without undue cost in any of the public grounds in Washington and whether they may serve any purpose that will warrant their preservation. The matter was discussed but action defer-

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red until after an inspection of the columns had been made, when the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

"RESOLVED, That the Commission sees no means by which the old Treasury columns can be utilized in the embellishing of the public grounds".

10. The Secretary read the letter from the Engineer Officer in charge of the Washington Aqueduct transmitting plans showing details of the proposed McMillan Memorial Fountain, the approach to the fountain, and one photograph of the model of the fountain, and requesting approval of these plans by the Commission. A careful inspection of the plans was made, but action was deferred until after an inspection of the proposed site for the fountain, when the following report was made:

"The Commission of Fine Arts, after visiting the site of the proposed McMillan Memorial, desire, if possible, to examine the model and to consult the designers of the fountain before formally expressing their opinion on its artistic excellence and its appropriateness for the position which it is intended to occupy. In order to facilitate action, a Committee of the Commission, consisting of Messrs. Millet, French, and Gilbert, has been appointed to attend the proposed conference."

This conference was arranged to be held Saturday morning, January 21, 1911, at 215 West 57th street, New York City.

11. The letter from the Commissioners of the District of Columbia was read by the Secretary, requesting the advice of the Commission in regard to the height of private buildings to be erected on Squares 167 and 221, but action was deferred until after an inspection of these two sites had been made; then the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

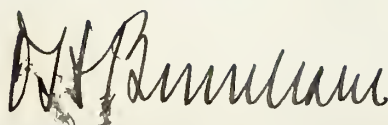
"RESOLVED, That, after a careful consideration of the letter from the Commissioners of the District of Columbia dated January 4, 1911, and an inspection of the Squares in question (167 and 221), the Commission of Fine Arts recommends that buildings in these squares be limited to a height of eighty (80) feet."

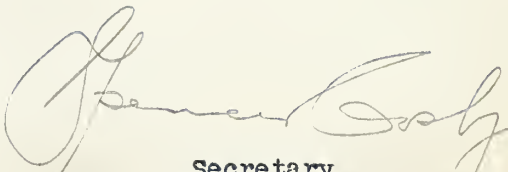
5- 12. Two letters from President Taft were received during the meeting, and given immediate acknowledgement. One suggested an examination of the competitive plans and drawings for the new buildings for the Department of State, of Justice, and of Commerce and Labor; the other referred to the Commission the question of the location by the Commissioners of the District of Columbia of a reformatory on the Belvoir tract in Virginia, below Mount Vernon, which is opposed by the Regents of Mount Vernon, and suggested a hearing of both sides by the Commission. A hearing was accordingly arranged for 10:30 A. M. the next day, Saturday, and a committee, consisting of the Chairman, Mr. Millet and Mr. Gilbert, was appointed by the Chair to hold the hearing and report to the President.

13. The Commission then left the Office and after a short interval for lunch, proceeded to the lower floor of the Treasury Department where inspection was made of the plans and drawings submitted in the competition for the erection of buildings for the Departments of State, of Justice, and of Commerce and Labor. Then it proceeded to the Capitol and inspected the portrait of General Thomas in the Office of the Senate Committee on the Library; an interview was also had there with Senator Wetmore regarding the bronze marking tablets. Afterwards an inspection was made of the site for the proposed McMillan Fountain in McMillan Park, and then an inspection of Squares 167 and 221 to determine the proper height of private buildings to be erected on these Squares. Finally the Commission looked at the pieces of the old Treasury Department columns, lying in Potomac Park along North B street.

14. At 5:50 P. M. the Commission adjourned.

APPROVED:


Chairman.


Secretary.

Chicago, Illinois,

January 26, 1911.

Hon. Geo. Peabody Wetmore,
Chairman, Joint Committee on the Library,
United States Senate.

Sir:

In compliance with the resolution of the Joint Committee on the Library, adopted at its meeting of January 12, 1911, in regard to bronze tablets to mark historical places in the District of Columbia, the Commission of Fine Arts has the honor to submit the following report:

The Commission is anxious to render every assistance it can to your Committee in securing the adoption of worthy designs for the proposed commemoration tablets, which it believes to be a matter of serious artistic importance.

The essential feature of such a tablet being the inscription, its excellence depends chiefly upon the skill and artistic feeling with which the lettering is distributed and designed; and any decorative elements that may be added, such as borders or emblems or other devices, should be used strictly as accessories, to heighten the effect of the composition formed by the lettering itself. It follows, therefore, that as the text of the inscriptions must vary widely, there should be almost equal variation in the forms of the tablets themselves and in the disposition, if not in the character, of the emblems or other accessories. Moreover, the situation of each tablet and the shape, texture and general character of its background might have an important influence as to form and design, if inharmonious effects are to be avoided.

For all these reasons the Commission cannot but question the desirability of adopting any stock design or designs for the frame and decorations, with the expectation of repeating them for different inscriptions, and would urge that each tablet be designed to meet its own condition. This would not in the least preclude the maintenance of a single harmonious character of treatment throughout the series, nor would it preclude the repetition in the different tablets of certain elements of design, such as the United States Seal, which would be desirable as giving a uniform official character to the tablets, or one or more particular patterns of border, mouldings, or a given character of lettering. Such repetitions would be desirable artistically, and would effect an appreciable economy in the preparation of the patterns and moulds for casting. Our point is simply that each new inscription and each new location presents a new problem, - that of arranging a new set of words in such a way and forming them with letters of such size and shape that they will make an agreeable composition upon a tablet well fitted for the place it is to occupy.

The art must lie in the composition of the individual tablet quite as much as in the selection of good letters and other elements; else good

taste in the type-founder would ensure the printing of beautiful books. As a matter of fact the artistic ability involved in composing a beautiful page of type, such as a title page or an inscription, is of a very high order, and such work cannot safely be delegated to any one who lacks that ability.

Under the circumstances the Commission feels that for it to undertake the duty of designing the proposed series of tablets would be a precedent for taking up serious burdens of a creative sort, lying clearly beyond the field of advisory and critical activities assigned to the Commission by law, and it, therefore, recommends that a designer be employed to undertake this work. The Commission will be very glad to pass upon the designs, and in any other way to assist your Committee with its advice.

Very respectfully,

(Signed) D. H. Burnham,

Chairman.

Washington, D. C.,
January 20, 1911.

Mr. President:

In accordance with your instructions the Commission of Fine Arts gave a hearing on January fourteenth to the District Commissioners, the Regents of Mount Vernon, and others, on the question of the proposed location of a reformatory on the Belvoir tract in Virginia, and has the honor to submit to you its opinion on the subject as a question of art.

The Commission sympathizes with the sentiments of those who zealously oppose any changes in the features of the landscape in the vicinity of Mount Vernon which would disturb the peaceful seclusion of the spot, and it recognizes fully the importance of preserving the sylvan character of the shores of the Potomac. Nevertheless, after hearing the arguments for and against the establishment of a reformatory on the site selected, the Commission finds no objection to this on aesthetic grounds.

The facts on which this opinion is based are briefly summarized as follows:

The land to be occupied by the reformatory is on the further slope of the wooded point known as the Belvoir tract and, since the location of the buildings is dictated by the conformation of the hillside, no part of any structure will be visible from Mount Vernon. The only disturbance of the shore line, which will otherwise be preserved in its present aspect, will be a simple landing at the point. No merchandise wharf will be built and no coal docks. No power house will be needed because it is arranged for economic reasons to conduct water and to transmit electricity from a plant already established below. The buildings of the reformatory will be of one story, inconspicuous in character, and located more than a mile inland from the landing, three and one-half miles in a direct line across the water from the house at Mount Vernon, and over six miles distant by the nearest road. The timber will not be cut for commercial purposes, and only such clearings will be made as will be necessary for the farming operations usual in such reformatories.

We give no opinion regarding the sentimental influence of a reformatory located within three miles of Mount Vernon, as this is not referred to us in your letter.

Very respectfully,

(Signed) F. D. Millet,

VICE-CHAIRMAN.

The President,

The White House.

